

*We publish the following articles in answer to the frequent enquiries that we receive about the origin of the Advent Garden.*

Helen Eugster

## **The Advent Garden**

The Advent Garden was completely unknown in Switzerland until Sister Gustel Wetzel brought the tradition from Germany to the Sonnenhof in about the year 1927. To begin with it was more like a game involving a moss garden, branches of fir, a large candle and smaller candles with which Sister Wetzel occupied her children on the floor of the living-room and dormitory. Dr. Bort, who was the doctor at the time, came in and recognised the significance of this game and persuaded the co-workers to adopt it for use within the whole house community.

Sister Gustel left the Sonnenhof in the following year and she now lives in the United States. We have not been able to learn from her where in Germany the tradition originated, or the form in which she knew it.

After initial struggles to find the right form for the Advent Garden, the simple ceremony that we know today was agreed upon. A spiral leading inwards was laid on the floor, decorated with crystals and flowers and strewn with autumn leaves. At the centre stood a large candle and a blue cloth decorated with stars was draped around its base. Little candles were set into apples together with pine twigs in the form of a cross. The ceremony was accompanied by Edmund Pracht's song "Over stars is Mary wandering", and legends were told of Paradise, of Mary and of the elemental beings.

As time went on the Sonnenhof had many enquiries from educators and kindergarten teachers about the Advent Garden. The article which follows was published in 1944 in a letter in the "Ita Wegman-Fondsblatt". Today this lovely tradition is practised not only in our homes and schools and in the Christian Community, but also in many kindergartens in Switzerland.

### **Celebrating Advent with Children**

A true participation in the festivals as they occur during the year is a source of joyful experience for every child. In handicapped children, helped to accompany the life of the earth in the right way, enriching and healing forces are engendered as they breathe out with the soul of the earth in the fullness of summers and return through autumn's decay to the inwardness of winter. The children themselves often have difficulty in finding the right balance between breathing in and out, whether it be the nightly experience of leaving and returning to the body, or whether they are too loosely connected to the physical. Time and again it will be a healing influence for such children if they are able to participate in the cycle of the year through festivals celebrated with true and beautiful images. The first of Advent is a special Sunday. It lies between the autumn festival, when the children experience the harvest and the first dying down of nature

and hear the legend of St. Michael's victory over the dark dragon, and the peaceful, deeply inward festival of Christmas. On this Sunday our children experience the joy of the Advent Garden. Many years ago a nurse from Germany brought this tradition to the Sonnenhof and began to put it into practice with her children. The wisdom and beauty of this simple ceremony were so impressive that it became an annual event with us and in many other places too.

A magical indoor garden is made out of moss and is decorated with crystals and with the last flowers of the year. A little path leads gradually to the centre of the moss garden, where there stands a raised candle. It is getting dark outside and in the room there is only the light of the single candle. More candles, set in apples, are waiting at the entrance to the path. The children come in quietly and expectantly and take their places around this unusually dark garden. With reverence they listen to the story of the light-filled garden of Paradise and of how it came about that Man was banished to the earth which remained cold and dark until the Christ child brought warmth and light. Now with the help of the children themselves it can become lighter in this dark garden. One after the other the children walk the path to the centre, lighting their own small candle; gradually, together, these give light and warmth to the whole garden. The ceremony is accompanied by quiet music on the lyre and by the attentive way in which everyone present inwardly takes part as the children walk with their candles.

Although it is such a simple children's tradition, it is filled with wisdom, and with this little festival begins the true inwardness of the weeks before Christmas.

It is the mood of wonder and reverence in this festival, as it is repeated every year, awakening healing forces in the souls of the children and opening their hearts to the good in the world. As they walk with dignity to the light at the centre, there is revealed in each child a deep humanity and uprightness - gifts which were received in early childhood from the spiritual world. By helping to bring light to the garden they can express their thanks, and their will to help in the world is strengthened. The soul of the child is deeply satisfied and is filled with hope for the future.

#### **Johanna Russ**

When I came to the Sonnenhof in 1926/27, first to attend a course and then to work, I found the tradition of the Advent Garden already established. I was told that it had been introduced from Munich by Sister Gustel. She had first made an Advent Garden with her group of children, laying it out simply on the table. Later it was done in the hall so that all the children could participate. From these small beginnings the tradition has spread. Sister Gustel married a co-worker at Weleda and they went to America - I do not know her married name. I was not aware that the Advent Garden might have been brought from Austria by Karl Schubert.

#### **Frida Knauer**

In May 1925 I came from Lauenstein to take part in the weekly curative eurythmy course at the Sonnenhof. It was then that Dr. Bort asked me to help at "Holle", where several children were already being cared

for. Sister Gustel was there, too, and as far as I remember she told us of a tradition in Bavaria where the farmers held a little ceremony at Advent time within their own families. We were very happy to follow her suggestions. It must have been the first Sunday in Advent 1925.

A moss garden was prepared in the middle of the living-room floor and was decorated with crystals and other beautiful objects of nature. In the middle was a large candle surrounded by smaller ones, each one set in an apple. As in the old family ceremonies on the first of Advent, we sat round the moss garden with the children of "Holle" – the big candle in the middle was lit and we sang Advent songs. Each child in turn was allowed to take a candle from the moss garden and to light it at the candle in the centre.

For all of us this peaceful and reverent Advent mood was a deep inner experience. Filled with wonder and gratitude we were led towards Christmas time by the shining candles which we had lit together in the fullness of our hearts.

As the number of children grew, the custom evolved of making a decorated spiral of moss, with the large lighted candle of the Advent Garden in the middle. The apples, with candles stuck in them, were placed at the entrance to the darkened garden of Paradise. One after the other the children walked the spiral, accompanied by lyre music and singing, until they reached the big candle in the middle; here they lit their own candle and on the way back placed it in the moss spiral, so helping to bring light to the Paradise garden.

Translation by Peter and Hanna Woods